

# Dances on the Edges of Modernism

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## Abstract

*When modernism started to become the major paradigm in the western world, western theatre also took part in the development. Realism, a child of modernism, soon became the mainstream of the theatrical expression. As soon as realism became established in the first-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-realist movements flourished as reactions to the establishment. These movements were so diverse that it ranged from movements which were purely artistic such as what was done by Edward Gordon Craig until those that were political like what was proposed by Bertolt Brecht (1992).*

*Keywords: Brecht, neo-romanticism, epic theatre, Wagner, surrealism, postmodernism, Nietzsche, absurd theatre, Ionesco, realism, Artaud, Camus*

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The history of western theatre is always related to that of western philosophy. In fact, theatre theory in the ancient Greece, the mother of western civilization, was a part of philosophy as seen in the works of Plato (427-347 B.C.) or Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). In its journey to modernity,<sup>1</sup> artists/theorists/philosophers conveyed their thoughts about theatre based on certain philosophical schools although at times they were not directly related. As the main-stream modernist philosophy (positivism/essentialism) was in command in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theatre developed its theory based on positivism/essentialism. Started by the naturalists who relied heavily on science, the positivist/essentialist-based theatre found its mature form in realism. Realism, an art form that attempts to describe human behavior and surroundings objectively or to represent figures and objects exactly as they act/appear in life, has become common practice ever since. It has occupied the center stage of the theatre world.

The craze of the search for “the illusion of reality,” however, was soon challenged as reactions against realism erupted in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reactions were so diverse and multifaceted that while some were based on alternative philosophies, some others were based solely on artistic choices (thus, their philosophical bases were hardly apparent). In this paper I will try to explore the “anti-realist” forces, the forces that tried to “de-center” modern theatre. I will try to find their philosophical bases in terms of how they see reality or “truth.” Since the reactions oftentimes happen simultaneously, my discussion will not necessarily be in chronological order.

The first movement that tried to revolt against realism was neo-romanticism which developed in Germany, championed by Richard Wagner (1974). The neo-romanticists believe that realism (and naturalism) only presents life superficially. They only touch the surface and miss a more important part: the soul. Truth, to Wagner, rests not on everyday reality as observed by science but on deeper ground, an eternal one, that of Life. Therefore, neo-romanticists try to depict the “soul state” or “inner being” of a

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<sup>1</sup> Modernity differs from modernism in that modernity is related to time (the time when modernism occupies the world) while modernism is a system of thought.

character rather than the surface/realistic appearance or action. "The character of science is therefore finite: that of Life, unending; just as Error is of time, but Truth eternal" (Wagner, 1974: p. 777). Some other theorists even went further by finding the "collective soul" that has been planted by their ancestors. Wagner, in turn, proposed that playwright/composer should create myths that give a collective experience to the audience. In practice, for instance, Wagner removed boxes and balconies and raised the auditorium, which was shaped like a fan, to give equal view of the stage. He also used lights to make the stage a dream world in which the enactment of the myths happened.

The neo-romanticists also found supports from noted philosophers. In the search for the myth, for instance, the neo-romanticists got a philosophical basis from Nietzsche (1974). He went back to ancient Greece to investigate the basic truth of tragedy, discussing Apollonian and Dionysiac duality of the ancient drama. He argued that tragedy is a combination of the *rationality* of Apollonian art and the realms of *dream* and *intoxication* in Dionysiac art (Nietzsche, 1974: p. 821). Nietzsche further contended that drama has moved away from the mythical, dreamlike state since Sophocles' emphasis on characters instead of chorus, and it has continued to develop in "anti-Dionysiac" or "anti-mythic" trend (826). Therefore, he proposed the comeback of "mythopoetic spirit" (827), since it is the place where "the truth" resides. Such a spirit is found in Wagnerian theatre.

In relation to the myth, Nietzsche (1974) also discussed the idea of "overman" or "superman" in which, unlike the mob or mass, every individual is highly conscious of himself. The overman feels deeply but is also rationally controlled, a combination of Dionysiac quality with Apollonian sensibility. On the one hand, he is unlike the "all too rational" modern men who sometimes do not know how to feel, on the other hand, he is also much more sensible than the old romanticist. The myth gives the "model" of highly super-quality society.<sup>2</sup>

Another revolt happened in France with the rise of the symbolists. Probably influenced by Wagner (1974), the symbolists try to look for spirituality in theatre. To the symbolists, truth is not on things observed by the senses. Instead, it is hidden inside human psyche. Thus, to acquire the truth means to dive into the spirituality of being (see Meateerlink, 1974: pp. 726-731). Therefore, they strip any "unnecessary" embellishments on stage, such as some technological equipment or excessive scenery. They attempt to draw spirituality from the text and the acting that are laden with symbolic imagery. Maurice Meateerlinck (1974), for instance, created plays that have dreamlike atmosphere, with texts that "suggest" ideas and emotions instead of expressing them directly. Meateerlinck thinks that drama has so far been too violent: it's about revenge, a mother killing her children, a son killing his mother, etc. "Amidst the idle uproar of acts of violence," says Meateerlinck, "the solemn voice of men and things, the voice that issues forth so timidly and hasitatingly, cannot be heard" (1974: p. 728). He proposes that the theatre should capture "the tranquil moments of life" (730), a theatre that is "motionless," silent, and solemn.

More than just working on text and acting, however, some symbolists also work on stage design. In this context appeared designers such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. Appia designed symbolic stages that gave a better effect on Wagnerian theatre (thus, symbolism supported neo-romanticism). Craig wanted to create stages that suggest a unifying idea or emotion in one set on modern stages.

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<sup>2</sup> This idea has been associated with Nazi, although some say his sister manipulated his ideas for Nazi's purposes.

Craig, however, was more an expressionist than a symbolist. Expressionists try to explore more on the violent aspects of the human psyche, creating a nightmare world on stage. Like symbolists, expressionists also try to delve into the human psyche. The difference is that they are more interested on the grotesque aspects. Therefore, they usually use distortion or exaggeration of forms. In Craig's designs, for instance, the stage can be so gigantic that the actors are dwarfed on the stage. With the play of lights on the actor and the stage, the "existence" of human being is given surprising contrasts (imagine when the stage is dark and the actor is on the spot light, compared to when the stage is showered with lights and the actor becomes dwarfed). With such an approach the expressionists try to uncover the hidden truth (see Encarta Encyclopedia<sup>3</sup> on Edward G. Craig).

The most violent rebellion, I suppose, was done by the dadaists. Dada is an anti-essentialist movement in its fullest sense in that it emphasizes "nothingness" and an anti-realistic movement in that it is completely anti-artistic. Philosophically, the dadaists, who grew up discovering the meaninglessness of life threatened by wars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially World War I, questioned if there was such thing as the essential truth. Dada is in a sense an intellectual protest against positivistic assertions and western culture's reliance on wars to solve problems. In fact, they actually never cared if there was truth, since the search of truth in western civilization only brought about destruction (see Gordon, 1987: pp. 7-24). Artistically, they tried the unthinkable in modern, realistic theatre context. Even further, they created "artistic anarchy" (Gordon, 1987: p. 21) as their mode of expression. They used unlikely articles for their stages, often articles they found on the streets. They "destroyed" the idea of a stage and "terrorized" (not in Artaud's sense, which will be discussed later) the audience. They made unlikely surprises that they even surprised themselves. In fact, they found artistic enjoyment in surprising the audience and themselves.

A movement that is directly related to dada is surrealism. More "structured" than dada artistically, surrealism also has clearer philosophical ideas. Surrealists also emphasized the role of the unconscious in creative activity, but they employed the psychic unconsciousness in a more orderly and more serious manner. More than just being influenced by the dadaist, therefore, surrealists also got influences from symbolists and expressionists. Although not directly related to surrealist movement,<sup>4</sup> Alfred Jarry has a special place in surrealists' world. His play *Ubu Roi*, which is farcical, symbolic, and surrealist in mode, inspired those who revolted against modernistic values by ridiculing power that was highly sought after by the mainstream modernists.

Like other movements which revolt against realism/naturalism, surrealism rejects the idea that truth is observable by the senses. To them, surface appearance can be deceiving. The real truth is hidden behind the surface. To uncover the truth, therefore, means "plowing" the surface so that what is hidden is revealed. Surrealists work on the juxtaposition of images of the real to dig the hidden truth. They force the audience to see behind their surface observation by displacing realistic images and reestablishing them in a different way. In theatre, an example of surrealism can be seen in the work of Apollinaire, *Breasts of Tiresias*. Apollinaire claims that his play is surrealist in that, unlike realism, it "come(s) back to nature itself, but without copying it

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<sup>3</sup> (Microsoft) Encarta Encyclopedia is a digital encyclopedia that does not use page numbers.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Jarry died in 1907 and surrealist manifesto was in 1924.



In the process of writing, pure surrealists even believe in the power of the subconscious. Therefore, they write whatever comes up from the mind without correcting them. They believe that whatever comes up from the unconscious bears the real truth, and the act of editing them jeopardizes the real truth. They argue that although the structure of the "story" that comes out looks confusing, it carries the real truth since it comes truly from the subconscious (see Encarta Encyclopedia on Surrealism).

An even more "confusing" theatre was offered by the abstract movement, championed by Witkiewicz (1974). Witkiewicz contends that people should be fed up with "psychological truth" (1974) and the illusion of "real life" (1976) in theatre. Therefore, theatre should be based on Pure Form. By Pure Form he means that drama should have its own logic, intrinsic to the Form. "The idea is to make it possible to deform either life or the whole of fantasy with complete freedom so as to create a whole whose meaning would be defined only by its pure scenic internal construction, and not by the demands of consistent psychology of action according to assumptions from real life" (1973-74). Witkiewicz (1974) tries to make the audience see theatre as they see Picasso's painting. The commonly believed plot, structure, theme, etc. in realistic drama cannot be applied to "enjoy" his theatre, since it consists of images that cannot be decoded with such frame of reference. By seeing images framed in the Pure Form, he expects that the audience can discover truth in it. In other words, theatre should become the canvas of the overflow of the human psyche (the artist). Such an overflow cannot manifest in realistic images. Instead, it is in abstract images that in turn "attack" the audience psyche.

A very different revolt to realism was done by Brecht (1992) in his epic theatre.<sup>5</sup> Brecht's epic theatre is markedly different in that it is based on a philosophy, or even a Ideological system, that is clearly the opposite of the main-stream modern Ideology, Capitalism. While its Ideology, Marxism, criticized Capitalism; his epic theatre criticized realistic/dramatic theatre in general. Therefore, says Roland Barthes, to separate Brechtian theatre from its theoretical foundation would be erroneous (qtd in Worthen 772). Among other modern avant-garde, Brechtian theatre is probably the most total revolt against the main stream: it clearly covers both content and form.

Brecht's epic theatre (the form) actually developed from the need to deal with the political warfare (the content) in western Europe around World War I and II. In such a turmoil, it was believed that theatre should serve as a political instrument. The anti-capitalists believed (and now some still do) that any theatre is propagandistic and, therefore, any theatre is political. They believed that most theatres, directly or otherwise, serve capitalism (especially the one they called bourgeois realism).<sup>6</sup> To battle this reality, there was a need to create a theatre that is revolutionary both in form and content, and Brecht answered the need. In search for the truth, Brecht's theatre operates in a complete paradigm. Ontologically it uses historical realism—virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic values; crystallized over time. Epistemologically it works under the argument that knowledge (of reality) is value

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<sup>5</sup> Brecht in the end did not use "epic theatre" as the name of his theatre. Yet, he did not give a clear clue about what it should be named.

<sup>6</sup> Brecht was not impressed by socialist realism because artistically (the form) it cannot really criticize (or, in our contemporary term, "deconstruct") ideology.

mediated and hence value dependent. And methodologically it uses dialectic materialism (see Denzin and Lincoln 105-117).

Dramatic theatre, to Brecht (1974), is not adequate since it does not provide a chance for the audience to think. The audience is usually absorbed by the world of the theatre, especially because of the illusion of reality. In his explanation about epic theatre, Brecht proposes that theatre should provide a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding (71). To compare them he writes:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It's only natural—It'll never change—The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable—That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it—That's not the way—That's extraordinary, hardly believable—It's got to stop—The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary—That's great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (71).

To achieve such an effect to the audience, the theatre should be revolutionized. The structure should not be dramatic, but episodic. The stage is no longer the illusion of reality, but a place in which ideas are presented. The actor is no longer immersed in the character, pretending as if he is the character he is imitating, but he shows the audience that he is an actor enacting a character. Therefore, a new mode of expression is needed, something which Brecht calls "gestus." Gestus is gist and gesture, an attitude or a single aspect of attitude, expressible in words or action (Brecht 1992:p.42). By building "gestus," either personal or social, on stage, the actor keeps the audience distanced so that they can observe and evaluate what he is doing. The audience is alienated so that they keep thinking.

Another figure that has created a distinct form of theatre is Antonin Artaud (1958). Artaud introduces what he calls "theatre of cruelty," which later influences the absurdist movement. Like Brecht, Artaud considers that theatre has been stale and he wants a theatre that can "cure" the society. Yet, different from Brecht's, Artaud's theatre is basically not "political."<sup>7</sup> Instead, he is interested in the function of theatre as a cure to the society, and even more, to human being in general. Artaud compares his theatre to a plague to cure the society. A theatre that "attacks" like a plague, but after the attack the society is brought back to a new balance. "We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theatre, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and bring it into being" (13).

To achieve such a goal Artaud (1958) proposes a theatre that haunts the audience like a nightmare. It has to be magical and, therefore, relates to the "esprit" of being. The theatre should be equipped with "language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, [and] the theatre must organize (them) into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs on all level" (90). As a consequence, the theatre should "create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from servitude of psychology and 'human interest'" (90).

Therefore, although it will sound as an oversimplification, the truth in Artaud's theatre is beyond the observation of the senses and is even beyond anything

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<sup>7</sup> His criticism is not against a certain Ideology, but on civilization in general (although we may argue that he criticized western civilization in particular).



psychological. He wants to touch cosmic subjects such as Creation, Becoming, and Chaos and bring such metaphysical ideas directly on to the stage (90). The theatre should bring ideas with “truly magical sense” (125) and, again, attack the audience in a truly magical way.

Finally, one of the most popular non-realistic movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is absurdism, which finds influence from Dadaist to Artaud. Philosophically, the absurdists are influenced by existential theories of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus, like in his play *Caligula*, discusses the fundamental absurdity of existence, that man is hopeless in finding his existence. Sartre, on the other hand, believes that—in the mid of the absurdity of life—the main values in life that can make human being free is accepting personal responsibility and relying on individual creative powers rather than on social or religious authority. The difference between philosophy-based absurdists such as Camus or Sartre and artistic-based absurdists like Ionesco or Beckett is that while the former tend to “discuss” it, the later “show” it. (Compare Camus’ *Caligula* and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*).

Absurdists make the famous dictum that man is lost in the world, all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless. They reject realistic theatre and other “ideological” theatres such as that introduced by Brecht (see Ionesco 1974:pp.767-72). If there is truth at all, it “lies in our dreams, in our imagination” says Ionesco (767). Life itself is senseless and absurd, there is no truth/meaning that we can get out of it. Absurdist drama tends to eliminate cause and effect relationships, reduce the communicative power of language, make characters as pieces of pawns, etc. They also make places non-realistic/specific and time indefinite. In short, they present the world as alienating and incomprehensible. A clear example can be seen in Samuel Beckett’s plays such as *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*. In *Waiting for Godot* Beckett pictures how life is uncertain, repetitive, and meaningless. *Endgame* portrays a desolate world with characters that have no clear purpose, no clear hope, and no meaning. Interestingly enough, Ionesco seems to suggest that there is truth in the imaginative world, and the real world cannot get it (Ionesco 1974:p.767). The real world and the imaginative world are “two antagonistic worlds failing to come together and unite” (767). The meeting of the two worlds in theatre only gives absurd, meaningless traces.

There are still some other dances on the edges of modernism that I do not discuss in this paper, such as futurism<sup>8</sup> (which glorifies technology) or any other *-ism* that I may fail to notice. They all have something in common in that they all seek alternatives in finding ultimate truth. They go either outside or inside the human psyche. They claim that they have the right path to truth or simply reject to claim anything. Some have made a great influence to the mainstream, some just lived shortly and barely shook the mainstream. However, they all have certain currencies in the emergence of a new thought system, post-modernism. To facilitate our understanding, let us see the table below:

#### **Modernism**

grand design  
ultimate truth  
unity  
uniformity

#### **Postmodernism**

local design  
relative truth  
diversity  
variety

<sup>8</sup> Futurism is a good example for an artistic revolt (against realism) but not an Ideological/philosophical one. Its glorification of technology shows that Ideologically it is under positivism/essentialism.

objectivity

subjectivity

The list is, of course, an oversimplification. However, it can help us understand that there is a significant shift of system of thought.

The modern avant-garde movements have led people to understand that the linear development of science and technology does not guarantee anything about a better society. They also start to realize that the assertions of positivism do not always solve human problems. Brecht (1992), for example, tried to show that under positivist beliefs and scientific experiments humanity is even devalued until it equals to other factors of production such as natural resources and technology. Artaud (1958) warned that the society is sick. Beckett tried to portray that life is meaningless and absurd. In short, these modern avant-garde movements have made a deposit in a new way of seeing life, postmodernism. Although post-modernism is by no means a systematic thought system in that it varies from one post-modernist to another, it gives alternatives to modernism's assertions about truth. Post-modernism rejects to claim that it has a universal truth or a grand design to humanity. Moreover, post-modernism is still evolving, waiting for new thoughts to enrich its views about life. It does not necessarily mean that it will provide the answer to all human inquiries, yet at least it promises an alternative viewpoint in understanding our being.

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